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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that it may be much more damaging, psychologically, to try to correct the written usage of persons whose nonstandard written forms correlate with their spoken dialect than to try to correct the nonstandard written forms of persons who do not use nonstandard forms in their speech. It is possible that nonstandard speakers will view a teacher's attempt to correct their nonstandard written forms as a way of denying the validity of their culture. It is concluded that it is quite possible that a correlation exists between students' spoken dialect and their written language and that, as there is no single standard of English, it is antihumanistic to require all students to master one particular dialect. (TS)

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NOT IN OUR STARS, BUT IN OUR AFFIXES?

Last spring, the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication had "Hidden Agendas" as its general topic, with the more specific question "What are we doing when we do what we do?" I spoke then, as now, about what we do as writing teachers when we try to "correct" the dialect features in our students' writing. For example, is it really their affixes (or lack of affixes) that we are trying to correct, or is it their stars--if you will, their heredity and/or their social and cultural backgrounds?

There are at least two hidden agendas, or assumptions, in what I've just said. One is that people's attitudes towards other people's use of language "are merely an extension of people's attitudes towards their culture and the people of that culture" (Kochman, p. 88). Another hidden assumption is that dialect features do exist in the writing of some students.

This second assumption warrants further consideration. At the CCCC's meeting last spring, Gary Underwood presented an interesting paper entitled "Bidialectal Freshman Handbooks--The Next Flim-Flam." His glum prediction was that "bidialectal" programs to teach students to speak standard English as a second dialect (hence the term "bidialectal") would soon be joined by bidialectal handbooks to teach students to write standard English, presumably on the assumption that they can already write in their own nonstandard dialect and need only add on standard English as a second written dialect.

One of Underwood's basic criticisms of this approach was that it seems based on the faulty assumption that writing is a reflection of speech and

that therefore there is a correlation between nonstandard spoken dialect, on the one hand, and nonstandard written features, on the other. Underwood attacked this assumption from the viewpoint of transformational grammar, pointing out that according to a transformational model, writing and speaking are alternative ways of expressing a given deep structure; neither mode is dependent on, or derived from, the other. Since these two kinds of outputs are parallel rather than sequential, there is no theoretical justification for saying that a person's written usage is determined by his spoken dialect. After all, we Americans say /skejuwl/ while the British say /ʃedyuwl/, yet we spell the word the same: schedule. I say /griyziy/, which should sound perfectly normal here in New Orleans but which causes raised eyebrows back in Michigan. My spelling, though, meets Northern and Southern standards of etiquette: I spell it greasy.

We all know from practical experience that Underwood is right in arguing that a person's spoken dialect is not necessarily reflected in his or her writing. Various groups of Easterners and Southerners learn to write /bahn/ with an r (barn) and /aydihər/ without an r (idea), and many Black English speakers learn to write impeccable standard English. Furthermore, we have probably all had white students who speak only a so-called standard dialect but whose writing contains, at least sometimes, some of the "non-standard" usages found in the writing of some Black English speakers. Underwood himself gives such examples as "it was never mention" and "she feel like it" (p. 11).

Before going further, I should perhaps discuss the kinds of nonstandard written features that have sometimes been attributed to dialect interference, specifically interference between Black English and establishment

English. (After all, this is a session on black dialect and writing.) For convenience, I will speak as if these written features are in some sense Black English features, even though that assumption is open to question.

Various research studies suggest that only a few Black English features occur with much frequency or consistency in the writing of older students, particularly college students. Walt Wolfram and Marcia Whiteman found, for example, that it was mainly Black English morphology that was represented in the writing of the tenth graders they studied (p. 38). Similarly, Daisy Crystal found that the writing of a group of ghetto students entering college showed mainly the absence of past tense and third singular markers (p. 44). Since I have found essentially the same pattern in the writing of my own college students (and for that matter in the writing of younger students as well), I draw examples from "Contrast of Death and Killing" (see Appendix), a paper written by a Black English speaking junior who chose to enroll in my freshman writing class two years ago. For convenience, let's call her Brenda.

I studied the Black English features in five of Brenda's formal papers, all but one of them argumentative, in order to see whether the use of dialect features in "Contrast of Death and Killing" is typical of her writing. In most respects it is.

There are no simple past tense verbs in this particular paper, or at least none that form the past by the addition of -ed, but even a quick reading will show that there are a number of past participle forms (most functioning as verbs, some as adjectivals) which do not have the -ed regularly found in mainstream dialects. The following are some examples:

Lines 3-4: But many people are been kidnapped and kill
and no one pay the price

Lines 28-29: Other diseases can be cure if caught at an early age.

Line 29: no medicine or cure has been develop.

Lines 36-37: a person can become disable and have to be depended on others.

Lines 41-42: the environment is mess up.

The Black English past participles occur about 70% of the time in this paper; that is, regular past participles occur without -ed about 70% of the time. Overall, Brenda omits past tense and past participle -ed about 80% to 90% of the time in her writing.

Another prominent Black English characteristic is the omission of the third singular verb ending, as in the following examples from Brenda's paper:

Lines 3-4 : no one pay the price

Lines 8-9 : does this really mean that no one handle these records

Line 10: Each day the society present the death total

Lines 29-30: All the doctors know is, what it arise from.

The third singular verb ending is absent about 80% of the time in this paper and in Brenda's writing as a whole.

Noun plural markers are absent much less frequently, but still noticeably, as for example in

Lines 6-7 : These statements only apply to the uncounted record that are claim

Lines 17-18: Some shooter aim at one thing and shoot another thing

Lines 20-21: Many more killing have taken place

Plural endings are absent about 45% of the time in this particular paper,

but only about a third of the time overall. Noun possessive endings seem to be absent more consistently (in 7 out of 10 cases overall), but the possessive construction occurs so infrequently that one could almost fail to notice the uninflected possessives. Here, we have two examples ("another person life," lines 11-12, and "many people lives," line 26) balanced against one inflected possessive ("ones life," line 35).

As the "Death and Killing" paper suggests, then, the Black English pattern that seems to occur most often in the writing of older students is the absence of inflectional endings on verbs and to a lesser extent on nouns. Other features do occur, of course, such as the absence of is and are, the use of was rather than were, and even an occasional multiple negative, as in lines 43 and 44 of the "Contrast" paper: "There are going to be diseases that no physician can not find nor cure." Such features as these are syntactic. Black English phonological features are also occasionally reflected in the spelling of college students. But it is the morphological features--the absence of the inflectional verb and noun endings--that occur most frequently and most consistently. ♦

Brenda omits a high percentage of these verb and noun inflections in even her most formal speech. When asking ourselves whether the written absence of these verb and noun endings should be ascribed to her spoken Black English, we need to consider several general points. On the one hand, it is certainly true that "standard" speakers may leave off such endings--at least some speakers do, at least part of the time. But is the percentage of standard speakers who leave off such endings in writing as great as the percentage of nonstandard speakers who do so? And do these inflection-omitting standard speakers omit the inflections as often in writing as nonstandard

speakers do? Two fairly recent studies (one by Sternglass and one by Kirschner and Poteet) have found similar kinds and quantities of usage "mistakes" in the writing of black college freshmen and white college freshmen in remedial classes, but neither study provided the kind of data needed to answer these quantitative questions about the writing of standard speakers compared with nonstandard speakers.

Naturally one's nonstandard spoken dialect is not likely to be the only factor causing or perpetuating the use of nonstandard features in one's writing. But until and unless empirical evidence shows that standard and nonstandard speakers are equally prone to (for example) omit inflectional endings, I will remain convinced that there may be some correlation between a person's spoken dialect and his written usage. True, there is no necessary correlation, as common sense, experience, and transformational theory all suggest. But I suspect that there is still a tendency for such a correlation to exist. If I am right, a transformationally-based model of language performance will have to account for this tendency.

At any rate, there is no denying that many speakers of Black English (as well as of other "nonstandard" dialects) exhibit written features that appear to be related to their spoken dialect, and perhaps actually are so related. By this time, though, you may be wondering whether it makes any difference if this correlation is only apparent, or real.

My personal answer is yes and no, depending on what one intends to do or not do about these "nonstandard" written features. If (or when) such features reflect a person's spoken dialect, then they are a reflection of that person's cultural background and heritage. In this connection it is well to keep in mind that there is no justification for the myth that "non-

standard" dialects result from physical or mental deficits or from sheer laziness. "Nonstandard" dialects stem from two major sources: first, geographical isolation and/or cultural isolation and conflict, which accounts for the "nonstandardness" of Appalachian English; and second, linguistic conflict, which at least partially accounts for the "nonstandardness" of Chicano English. Both the linguistic factor and the cultural factor have been involved in the development and maintenance of Black English.

To digress somewhat with a more detailed sketch of the history of Black English, the linguistic conflict between West African languages and the English of seventeenth-century traders led to the development of what linguists call a pidgin language, a minimal communication language that because of its limited function is always relatively simple in vocabulary and structure. For example, pidgin languages tend to omit redundant or "unnecessary" grammatical features, such as the third singular verb ending; he walk is perfectly clear without the nicety of the /s/ ending. In context, even the past tense ending may be redundant, as for example in yesterday I walk, where the adverb yesterday is quite sufficient to convey the pastness of the action. So, too, noun plural endings are often dispensable, especially if there is a preceding quantifier: two boy, all the boy, a lot of boy. And the possessive relationship between two nouns can usually be made clear simply by juxtaposition, as in the girl foot, the man money.

The omission of such redundancies is typical of pidgin languages, regardless of the source languages they draw upon. In the case of the pidgins that developed among Europeans and West Africans, though, there seems to have been an additional factor contributing to the omission of

these endings, namely the structure of the West African languages themselves. Apparently most of them had no verb or noun endings but instead used other means of indicating concepts like pastness and plurality. The language of many black Americans like Brenda reflects even today a pidgin and West African heritage, as a result of the continuing social and cultural isolation of blacks from whites and of certain social patterns and factors within black culture itself.

Getting back to my question as to whether it makes any difference if a writer's nonstandard features are dialect-related, I would argue that it may be much more damaging psychologically to try to "correct" the written usage of a person whose nonstandard written forms correlate with his spoken dialect than to try to correct the nonstandard written forms of someone who doesn't use these forms in his speech. The nonstandard speaker may (rightly or wrongly) view a teacher's attempts to correct such written forms as just another way of denying the validity of his culture. Thus it does seem important to know whether a person's written usage reflects his spoken dialect.

Looking at the matter differently, though, I would argue that it should be irrelevant to make this distinction between dialect-related "errors" and those that are not dialect-related. It should be irrelevant because we should not place a great deal of emphasis on "correct" usage anyhow, whether this usage be spoken or written. As James Sledd has observed,

Even in an English department, in a conservative white university, my kind of standard doesn't exist any longer for most of my students. Maybe somehow a new community can be put together, with a more various standard language better fitted to a new world; but I don't expect

to see it. I do know that I will not bring that new world closer if I try to force my standards on it.
(1973 article, p. 772)

Sledd, then, suggests that it is unrealistic and impractical to maintain the old standards, or rather, the old standard. That, in fact, is a major part of the problem: the idea that there is a single standard to which everyone should somehow "measure up." The recently-adopted CCCC's resolution explicitly seeks to combat this elitist notion:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.
("Students' Right to Their Own Language," pp. 2-3)

The background statement supporting this resolution emphasizes not only the idea that there is no single standard of English and that it is anti-humanistic (if not outright immoral) to insist that everyone master one certain dialect, but also the idea that teachers should de-emphasize mastery of the so-called "standard" forms simply because this aspect of writing is relatively unimportant. As it says in the background statement,

If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write. (p. 8)

Unfortunately, though, there are still many teachers who consider it a top priority task to eradicate Black English and other "nonstandard" features from their students' writing, or at least to make their students

bidialectal or bistylistic as writers. Thus in her article on dialect mixture Daisy Crystal writes that she devised a test to examine college freshmen's competence in standard English, feeling that

Whether they [the students] could write interesting compositions or knew how to "organize" their writing seemed trivial in comparison, particularly since students take Freshman English to learn precisely that. (p. 44)

In my opinion, that kind of attitude has been largely responsible for students' inability to write with conviction and power. Every English teacher--from kindergarten on up--seems to think that his or her job is to get kids to write "correctly," and that somebody else farther up the line is supposed to get kids to actually write something worth writing and to do it in an interesting and effective way.

If we high school and college teachers can't revolutionize the teaching of English overnight, at least we can take stock of where we ourselves are at. What would you do, for example, if "Contrast of Death and Killing" were turned in to you? Would you concern yourself first of all with Brenda's "nonstandard" use of morphology and occasionally of syntax? If so, I ask you, I plead with you, to study the paper again. Would it really be a good paper if all the apparent dialect features were "corrected"? I don't think so, and I hope that you would begin not by trying to get rid of Brenda's dialect features but by helping her write more coherently and interestingly.

I am tempted to suggest that the dialect "problem" is in the teacher (and society at large) rather than in the student. It is our intolerance that is the problem, and as Sledd suggests, we might pause occasionally to think of ourselves "not just as problem-solvers but as problems" (1973 article, p. 773). Thus the fate of nonstandard-speaking students may lie neither in their stars nor in their affixes, but in their teachers.

In closing, I can't resist reading a lengthy paragraph from Gary Underwood's paper, for we are essentially agreed on philosophical issues if not on linguistic ones. Underwood writes:

Bidialectalism, like eradication, is predicated on cultural elitism. It is not only racist but also anti-lower- and working-class to advocate that all Americans must model their language after that of the whites who have social power and prestige in America. To argue that students ought to learn this standard English solely because it is the language of the economically and socially dominant is fundamentally undemocratic. If it is mandatory, this policy should be legally contested, for dialectism is no more tolerable than either racism or sexism. If it is optional, it should be opposed as intellectually and morally indefensible. Such linguistic engineering does not have a place in a truly democratic society. But the ideological question is just that--a question, and your answer to it will be determined by your views of society. Whether or not you think the economically and socially oppressed should be coerced, cajoled, or compelled to ape the white ruling class depends upon your view of society, upon your position with regard to democracy, freedom, and equality. (pp. 3-4)

Though my views are not quite so extreme, I would certainly insist that we teachers must take it upon ourselves to combat the ethnocentrism and elitism that pervades the educational establishment in particular, and society in general. To a great extent the fate of nonstandard dialect speakers and writers lies in us, in what we do (or fail to do) to help future generations accept them and their language.

Appendix

Contrast of Death and Killing

The death that rip through this country is uncounted for. The only death that is on record is the ones that are provide in the newspapers in the obituary section. But many people are been kidnapped and kill and no one pay the price or the case is put back for later reconsideration. The misphap of small and big people downing is not accounted for. Oh yes, you might see a small write up in the paper and then it left alone. These statements only apply to the uncounted record that are claim, that the record are straight out, but does this really mean that no one handle these records that are not authorize.

Each day the society present the death total by the high inexpense of killing people all over. Speaking of killing mean taken another person life. Not only does people take lives, but objects take lives, for instance the shaggy automobile that are been built today. Another killer is the airplane, that are falling right out the sky killing thousands of people. The plane only disgard alot of bodies all over the country. Another killer, is the weapon, that are put in unmanageable hands that put it to no good use. To aim and get what is being shot at, depend on the shooter. Some shooter aim at one thing and shoot another thing, like animals or a person.

Killing only contrast to any mean of taken a life. Like the shoot out at Southern University where two students was kill. Many more killing have taken place down through the years that was merely uncause for, that lie between both blacks and whites. Then dieing got out rages, people utilizing death by taking their own life by overdopes. Another form of death is the wide spread of different diseases.

Many of the disease doesn't really have a cure or some are effected on people by "mother nature." Diseases that are taken many people lives are cancer, syphilis, gonorrhea, rubeola, and pneumonia. Other diseases can be cure if caught at an early age. Cancer have has many researches, but no medicine or cure has been develop. All the doctors know is, what it arise from. When a person have cancer, they know there is little chance of them staying alive, but after a person is given a certain length of time to live, they usually die before the limited is up. But the other disease arise from unknown bacteria in the system except syphilis and gonorrhea. Syphilis come from toilet stool and part way sexual intercourse, the same as gonorrhea. The only time syphilis takes ones life, is when there are the bad case, but some time a person can become disable and have to be depended on others. Gonorrhea can be just as damage but when caught at the early stage leave no harrasser. Finally the disease or sickness is pneumonia, when a person just down right don't take care of themselves when the weather is bad.

In conclusion there is really no ending to killing and dieing when the environment is mess up. But it just goes to show that the scripture in the bible are true. There are going to be diseases that no physician can not find nor cure, or wars will never end.

Black English Morphology
in "Contrast of Death and Killing"

Inflectional Morphology

1. Absence of past participle -ed

Lines 3-4: But many people are been kidnapped and kill and no one pay the price

Lines 28-29: Other diseases can be cure if caught at an early age.

Line 29: no medicine or cure has been develop.

2. Absence of third singular ending

Lines 3-4: no one pay the price

Lines 8-9: does this really mean that no one handle these records

Lines 29-30: All the doctors know is, what it arise from.

3. Absence of noun plural ending

Lines 6-7: These statements only apply to the uncounted record that are claim

Lines 17-18: Some shooter aim at one thing and shoot another thing

Lines 20-21: Many more killing have taken place

4. Absence of noun possessive ending

Lines 11-12: Speaking of killing mean taken another person life.

Line 26: Diseases that are taken many people lives are

Derivational Morphology

1. Absence of derivational morpheme

Line 1: The death that rip through this country is uncounted for
[rather than unaccounted for]

Line 8: records [that] are straight out [rather than straightened
out; here both -en- and -ed are absent]

2. Presence of derivational morpheme

Lines 10-11: the high inexpense of killing [rather than expense]

Line 32: they usually die before the limited is up [rather than limit]

3. Substitution of derivational morpheme

Lines 36-37: a person can become disable and have to be depended
on others [rather than dependent]

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